



Recovering the art of diplomacy

The millions of people who are taking to the streets in capitals around the world to protest our war against Iraq are clearly trying to deliver a message regarding their feelings about our policy.

Less clear, but just as important, is the message they are inadvertently delivering about the need to sell our policies more effectively. How we sell our policies has implications relative to the policies themselves. After all, it's hard to sell a sow's ear as a silk purse. Still, making a case against Saddam Hussein in a post-9/11 world can't be as hard as we've made it.

So where did we go wrong and what could we have done differently?

In his State of the Union address, President Bush did his best to outline the stakes in protecting America from attacks like 9/11. Secretary of State Colin Powell followed up with a stellar performance at the United Nations on the "Saddam Question." But the major blowback to our policy did not happen in New York or Washington. It happened in capitals around the world — which suggests that we need a strategy for a diplomatic offensive at that level as well.

Having served as the U.S. ambassador to Tanzania in the aftermath of the bombing of the U.S. embassy there, I know how important a fully informed and engaged mission team can be in mitigating blowback and assuaging the concerns of a host government.

Given the protracted nature of the present war against fanaticism and ter-



Charles R. Stith

Guest Commentary

Boston

rorism, there are a number of things the Bush administration (and any future administration) must do to avoid or soften the sort of mass protest precipitated by our actions against Iraq.

For starters, at the point of taking a major policy position or strategic initiative, the administration needs to call all its ambassadors back to the U.S. for comprehensive briefings. The president needs to address his

diplomatic corps. After all, American ambassadors' orders read that they are personal representatives of the president. Fully briefing them gives them what they need to be effective advocates for our nation's policies. It also sends the message to foreign countries that their interests and support matter.

Secondly, regional State Department bureaus need a region-specific (or, when possible, a country-specific) rationale for the particular policy position we're taking. Countries need to know why the position we're taking in response to a particular set of circumstances is in their best interest as well as ours. I recently returned from a month-long, six-nation trip through Africa, and there was much con-

sternation and concern about what the U.S. was preparing to do in Iraq. Our lack of engagement with those governments on this significant move gives the impression that we believe they have nothing to lose. In fact, they have everything to lose if this war results in something similar to the 1973 oil shock that devastated African economies.

Finally, our diplomats need a tactical plan for engaging the governments, media and non-governmental organizations in the countries where they're posted. You don't need to be a public-relations maven to understand the extent to which this "Iraq thing" has been a public-relations disaster. The policy realities of a 21st-century world — despite President Bush's claim regarding the effect of polls on his policies — are that public perceptions *do* have an impact on policies.

Despite the argument for making better use of our diplomats in the field, clearly the administration is on the front lines of any diplomatic offensive. But what we must appreciate is that our ambassadors and other members of the diplomatic corps need to be on the flank to protect us from any rear-guard actions. This proposal is nothing radical; it is simply about the recovery of the lost art of diplomacy.

Charles R. Stith is the director of the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University and the former U.S. ambassador to Tanzania (1998-2001).